

12:00 AM, February 17, 2018 / LAST MODIFIED: 01:25 PM, February 17, 2018

## Plugging question leaks: A technical solution



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A spate of question leaks in public examinations has left the education authorities deeply embarrassed and, it appears, at a loss about what they can do. It is part of a larger problem of quality and good management of education which need serious attention. However, there is a simple technical solution for question leaks, which can be and should be implemented for the next round of public examinations.

There are various distinct steps now followed in the question preparation process. These include initial drafting of questions, reviewing the content and quality of the questions, selecting acceptable versions, choosing a final version out of two approved sets by lottery, printing the one final set, distribution of the question papers and storing them securely all over the country. On the examination day, the papers are transported to the centres, and finally handed to the examinees in the examination halls.

At any of the steps, the process may be compromised. Measures have been taken and are being taken to protect the process. But it can be seen that these measures have not quite worked. The critical step is the very last one—giving out to the examinees the question papers which have not been already leaked.

The last step can be ensured, irrespective of what happens earlier, by using multiple sets of question papers for the same subject. All the sets can be used in the examination, with each examinee receiving randomly one of the multiple sets in the examination hall at the last moment. The total number of copies of questions printed would still be the same as the number of examinees, but divided into different sets.

To illustrate the process, several, say eight, sets of question papers can be prepared and printed for a subject. For one thousand students in an examination centre, 125 copies of each of the eight sets can be available, and a student would randomly receive one set at the time of examination. The students would not know until the last moment which set of questions they would answer. There would be no incentive for or advantage from leaking questions in advance.

Until last year, there were actually eight sets of questions for SSC and HSC examinations prepared by each board for their students. Common questions for the whole country were introduced this year. As a result, the incentive for leaks in theory was increased eightfold.

There were good reasons for having a common set of questions for all eight boards—ensuring comparable levels of difficulty in questions and assessment standards. These advantages can be and should be maintained.

A large number of questions has to be prepared for each subject in order to construct multiple sets of questions. At present, a large collection of questions is prepared, out of which two sets for each subject are put together and one set is finally selected by lottery, which is printed, distributed and used in the examination. For the suggested approach, instead of one final set, eight acceptable sets have to be prepared and printed.

The Examination Development Unit located at Dhaka Board (BEDU) needs to have an expert team to make sure that the quality of the multiple sets are maintained, the topics in them are similar and the level of difficulty are comparable. Both multiple choice and short essay questions can be included as it is done now. The prior preparation steps until the final step can be the same as now.

An expert committee appointed by the Ministry of Education last year, based on consultation with teachers, students and specialists, made recommendations regarding necessary reforms in assessment of students' learning through public examinations and in-school evaluation. It also made suggestions about related issues in curriculum and the teaching-learning process. This writer was a member of the committee.

Among the steps suggested was to look at the nature of public examinations. The committee proposed that these examinations should focus more on competencies in Bangla, English, math, science and social studies, rather than make it a test of every subject and every textbook. The latter should be more a job of annual and half-yearly exams in schools and regular classroom assessments of students. The public exams then can be less drawn out and can be completed in no more than five days. Student's performance could be shown by both public exam results and transcripts from school.

The committee also proposed that co-curricular activities should be an opportunity for all-round development of students; practicing their skills and competencies related to academic, social, cultural and moral-ethical development of students; and taken into account in overall assessment of student and teacher performance

The committee also suggested making practical examination in the science subjects part of school evaluation rather than public exam. As it is conducted now, it does not add any value to student assessment and leads to an undue disadvantage for students in non-science subjects.

The education decision-makers need to consider the recommendations and decide on appropriate short and longer term actions. One short term action should be the measure proposed for plugging question leaks.

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